

WHITE HOUSE COUNCIL ON
STRONG CITIES, STRONG COMMUNITIES

FLINT, MICHIGAN

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative (SC2)

was an innovative approach for supporting cities experiencing population and job loss, persistent poverty, capacity constraints, and similar challenges in an era of dwindling resources. Each SC2 city shares a common narrative: despite having faced tremendous economic and demographic challenges for the last few decades, local leaders and stakeholders had a strong vision for change and seek a better federal partner.

Under SC2, communities including Flint, MI, received intensive technical assistance from federal interagency Community Solutions Teams that work in city hall to support the city's vision for economic development. SC2 worked with Flint on three priorities: (1) neighborhood stabilization and blight elimination, (2) economic development and brownfield remediation, and (3) public safety improvements. Mid-way through the two-year engagement, water quality emerged as a critical issue and the SC2 team provided additional technical support related to the Flint water crisis. Through a cooperative partnership of federal, state, regional, and local partners; community leaders; and local residents, the City of Flint and SC2 were able to make progress on each of these identified goals.

Major SC2 Accomplishments in Flint

- Neighborhood stabilization and blight remediation
- Economic development and brownfield remediation
- Public safety improvements

NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION AND BLIGHT ELIMINATION

Blight Elimination Framework

SC2 team members from HUD provided extensive feedback on the city's Blight Elimination Framework, which is a data-driven plan to eliminate blight and stabilize the city's housing market. When the city finalized the framework in the winter of 2015, SC2 supported efforts to publicize the effort and highlight it as a best practice. The SC2 team also organized two stakeholder meetings, in July 2014 and July 2015, to spread awareness of the framework among government and community leaders, including representatives from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, state agencies, and more. SC2 and HUD staff continued to monitor availability of resources for blight elimination, and helped the city explore options for using the Community Development Block Grant for code enforcement and related activities.

Problem Property Tool

The SC2 team, led by HUD, helped the city and the Genesee County Land Bank apply improved data and technology tools to the task of blight elimination. Through the National Resource Network, the city received guidance on the concept of a "problem property portal", which was a strategy identified in the Blight Elimination Framework. HUD also provided the city with special access to vacancy data from the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and created an online interactive map to help city staff (including Police, Fire, and Code Enforcement) use this information to guide their work. Regular updates to USPS data will continue to be made available.

Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant

The SC2 team has worked extensively with the Flint Housing Commission (FHC) to improve performance at its public housing properties, specifically by resolving outstanding HUD Office of the Inspector General audit

issues, increasing occupancy at two distressed public housing properties, completing the process of disposing of some struggling scattered site properties, and improving FHC's operating cash flow. HUD staff continue to work closely with the FHC. The SC2 team helped FHC and city staff to learn about HUD's Choice Neighborhoods program, and to work together to develop a long-term plan for the Atherton East property. This resulted in the city applying for, and receiving, a \$500,000 Choice Neighborhoods planning grant. The SC2 team, led by HUD, has provided significant support to the city and FHC as they explore this innovative, but complex, new HUD initiative. These efforts have significantly increased capacity and creative problem solving among city and FHC staff.

Adding Capacity Through AmeriCorps VISTA

The SC2 team worked with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to deploy AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers in Flint to focus on blight elimination activities. These VISTA members provided critical support on projects related to Choice Neighborhoods, the Blight Elimination Framework, and general community engagement around the city's *Imagine Flint* Master Plan.

Strengthening Connections with Private Lenders

The Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago's Detroit branch planned a forum to bring together lenders and real estate developers to discuss opportunities to invest in Flint. The event, held on September 15, 2016, helped the finance and development community understand the *Imagine Flint* Master Plan, the results of the city's Target Market Analysis, opportunities related to Choice Neighborhoods, and more.

Environmental Assessment for Redevelopment

To support SC2 objectives, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) conducted Phase 1 environmental site assessments for key redevelopment projects including the Swayze building and its 36 units of supportive housing.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND BROWNFIELD REMEDiation

Redevelopment of Buick City

The SC2 team diligently explored opportunities to support economic development at Buick City, a vacant 235-acre former automobile manufacturing complex. While these efforts were often thwarted (by market conditions, limitations on federal funds for Revitalizing Auto Communities Environmental Response (RACER) Trust property, etc.), the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Agency (EDA) has committed to working with the city and Chamber of Commerce to support a substantial project in the city. With EDA support, the Chamber led the development of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

Creating Chevy Commons Park

EPA has a long history of working with the city and the Genessee County Land Bank on brownfield remediation and redevelopment, highlighted by the ongoing work to turn Chevy in the Hole into a new park known as Chevy Commons. This work has continued in alignment with the SC2 initiative. In September 2014, EPA secured an additional \$1.9 million for Chevy Commons from the GM bankruptcy settlement. EPA has also worked with the U.S. Forest Service, breaking down federal silos and ensuring that funds from the two agencies are being used in close coordination. In addition to support on Chevy Commons, EPA provided technical assistance related to environmental assessments.

My Brother's Keeper and Creating Opportunities for Young Men of Color

In the fall of 2014, Flint was one of the first cities to sign on to the White House's My Brother's Keeper (MBK) challenge to improve opportunities for boys and

young men of color. SC2 was heavily involved in that effort, including leading a working group in drafting a local action plan. That Local Action Plan was approved by former Mayor Walling, and informed the city's decisions about how to deploy Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. MBK has also influenced the work of two important local partnerships: The Flint and Genessee Literacy Network and the Flint and Genessee Opportunity Youth Coalition. Flint is extremely well-positioned to improve opportunities for boys and young men of color; with the city's support, community leaders were encouraged to build on the existing momentum. In 2016, the SC2 team built on this foundation through the Summer Ambassadors Program, which provided jobs for 44 disadvantaged youth.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Data-Driven Decisionmaking around Crime

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)'s Diagnostic Center is a technical assistance resource designed to help local policymakers and community leaders use data to make decisions about criminal justice and public safety strategies. The Flint Police Department (FPD) requested Diagnostic Center support around property crime: specifically, arsons and breaking and entering. The Diagnostic Center team conducted a site visit and held regular conference calls with FPD detectives, and has gathered extensive incident-level crime data from FPD. They have analyzed that data, and have produced a report to the city with public safety strategies and recommendations. The Diagnostic Center will work with the city to implement those strategies, contingent upon resources.

Violence Reduction Network

Flint was selected to participate in the DOJ Violence Reduction Network. Members of the SC2 federal team, including the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) and the U.S. Attorney's Office, monitored the VRN effort and SC2 worked to ensure alignment between the VRN and Diagnostic Center efforts.

RESPONDING TO THE FLINT WATER CRISIS

The City of Flint began using the Flint River as its drinking water source in April 2014 and has faced a series of challenges since then. While this was not initially a priority area for the SC2 team, its importance became clear early on. In the fall of 2014, Flint exceeded allowable levels of total trihalomethanes (TTHMs) and was found to be in violation of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. At that time, the SC2 team began to monitor the water situation.

SC2 team members advised the city about the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF), which is the only federal funding source intended primarily for drinking water infrastructure. With support from the SC2 team, the city worked with the state to renegotiate existing loans and provide additional resources. The EPA also provided a TTHM expert to serve on the city's Water Technical Advisory Committee. As the TTHM issue moved toward resolution, it became apparent that a growing number of Flint residents had water with elevated lead levels. While EPA took the lead on this problem from a regulatory perspective, SC2 explored other angles for federal support, including the potential application of CDBG funds to address temporary solutions and permanent infrastructure improvements. In addition, EPA assigned additional experts to the city's Water Technical Advisory Committee, and committed to providing ongoing support to the city.

A federal Unified Command Group team, separate from SC2, deployed in January 2016 under the leadership of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to respond to the water crisis. SC2 worked in partnership with this group. Specific contributions included:

- **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA):** USDA supported Flint's residents in myriad ways. They provided blood lead testing at clinics for participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and expanded WIC eligibility to ready-to-feed infant formula, which does not need to be mixed with water. USDA also granted the State of Michigan funds to extend its Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) pilot project to Flint, ultimately giving more than 39,000 children in Flint and Genesee County a \$30 benefit package each summer month that included nutritious food that help mitigate the effects of lead absorption. In addition, USDA developed outreach materials and recipe booklets for food choices that fight the effects of lead poisoning in five different languages.
- **Department of Labor (DOL):** In the aftermath of the water crisis, DOL partnered with the State of Michigan and EPA to fund a National Dislocated Worker Grant for up to \$15 million, awarded to the State of Michigan's Talent Investment Agency. Of the \$15 million, \$7.5 million was immediately released to provide temporary employment for 400 eligible individuals to assist with the recovery work, as well as offer career and training services to help them find permanent work. Participants receive structured and soft-skill training, assistance with career planning, and connections with local employers. Additional funding, up to the amount approved, will be made available as the state demonstrates a continued need for assistance.
- **Small Business Administration (SBA):** In February 2016, SBA announced an economic support package to spur growth in Flint, which included microloan capital, education and training, technical assistance, and business and investment roundtable events. assistance for businesses and individuals affected by the water crisis include
- **Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD):** HUD staff worked with multifamily owners and the Flint Housing Commission to ensure that all residents had water filters installed in their units. They also provided training to building owners and their maintenance staff on how to accurately test the water for reporting purposes.